DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 305 620 CS 009 625

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TITLE Early Literacy Assessment in Texas: Recommendations for Change. TSRA Supports Position.
PUB DATE May 89
NOTE 4p.; The original version of this position paper was prepared for and endorsed by the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Viewpoints (120)
JOURNAL CIT Texas Reading Report; v11 n4 p1,9,11 May 1989

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Early Childhood Education; Educational Change; *Minimum Competency Testing; Reading Skills; Reading Tests; *Standardized Tests; State Standards; *Testing Problems; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS Educational Issues; Emergent Literacy; *Texas; *Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills

ABSTRACT

Standardized tests represent one way of obtaining assessment information. Yet in recent years educators and the public have voiced concerns about an overriding emphasis on tests and test scores. Pressure to "teach to the test" means that not enough time is spent on higher order thinking and literacy skills because minimal competencies have become the focus of the curriculum rather than one aspect of the educational program. These concerns are substantial; standardized testing of young children is an even more problematic practice. Some states are already responding to the problems associated with early childhood testing. Statewide testing of young children's reading and writing in Texas is accomplished through the first grade Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS) test, a multiple-choice, standardized instrument that assesses minimal competency in nine reading and four writing skills. A majority of Texas principals, teachers, and supervisors feel that this standardized test has had a negative effect on curriculum and teaching, and research studies and experiences in other states mirror these conclusions. Therefore, the elimination of the present first grade assessment program using TEAMS is recommended. The state should insure that a high quality, developmentally appropriate literacy assessment program be developed and implemented, with the following goals: (1) knowledge and skills assessed would reflect classic and current research on early childhood literacy learning; (2) assessment procedures would be designed to fit with early childhood literacy teaching practices; and (3) methods for gathering assessment data would include observation and performance samples of children's work under normal classroom conditions as well as test-like situations. (MM)

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ED305620

TEXAS READING REPORT

TEXAS STATE READING ASSOCIATION

Volume XI, Number 4 May, 1989

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TSRA Supports Position . .

Early Literacy Assessment in Texas: Recommendations for Change

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EDITOR'S NOTE***
The original version of this position paper was prepared for and endorsed by the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association. The TSRA Executive Board voted to endorse this position at its March meeting in Houston.

Standardized tests represent one way – a very widely used way – of obtaining assessment information. The entire testing process, however, has come under scrutiny in recent years. Educators and the public have voiced concerns about an overriding emphasis on tests and test scores in our nation. An estimated 100 million standardized tests were administered in public schools last year, an average of more than two-and-a-half tests per student. A U.S. Department of Education Task Force recently warned that multiple indicators of achievement, not merely test scores, should be used to evaluate learning. But the fact is that the test is by far the most significant basis used for judging student learning. Moreover, even though standardized tests were originally designed as indicators of achievement, they have turned into blueprints for instruction in our classrooms. Research studies have shown that the emphasis on testing has led to a situation in which teachers tend to "teach to" standardized tests used in schools, especially state competency tests. As a result the curriculum has suffered because it has been reduced to what can easily be tested on a standardized test. This problem is especially severe with state testing programs that are minimal competency tests. The pressure to teach to the test means that not enough time is spent on higher order thinking and literacy skills because minimal competencies have become the be-all and end-all of the curriculum rather than one aspect of the educational program.

Standardized Testing of Young Children

These general concerns about testing are substantial; standardized testing of young children is an even more problematic practice. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education have warned that pencil and paper tests can wrongly brand some 4- to 6-year-olds as failures and that highly formal testing procedures are inappropriate for many young children. *Right from the Start*, the report of the National Association of State Board of Education Task Force on Early Childhood Education agrees with these concerns and recommends widespread review of standardized testing programs and development of new approaches to documenting and reporting young children's learning and achievement.

States are already responding to the problems with early childhood testing. Concerned about the stress of mandatory testing on first graders, the Arizona legislature passed a bill in 1988 limiting such testing to a sample of students. Mississippi eliminated standardized testing of kindergartners beginning in the 1988-1989 school year because teachers were letting the test become a curriculum guide. In 1987 North Carolina passed legislation that replaced statewide standardized testing in grades one and two with "developmentally appropriate measures." A school readiness task force in California has cautioned against the use of standardized testing in early childhood programs and has called for a drastically altered assessment method. The NAEYC says that mass standardized testing should not occur before grade 3 and even then should be used in conjunction with other assessment measures, as the U.S. Department of Education Task Force recommended. Thus, standardized testing of young children is being called into question around the nation, and alternatives to such a practice are being developed.

Testing Young Children's Reading and Writing

A major focus of testing research and development in recent years has been the assessment of reading and writing. The fact that tests have become blueprints for literacy instruction has led several states to undertake major testing reform measures. Michigan and Illinois, for example, have completely revamped their statewide reading tests from grade 3 on up in order to bring the tests more in line with what national research efforts like those reported by the National Academy of Education in *Becoming a Nation of Readers* have revealed about the best ways to teach reading. These reforms have helped testing and teaching come together in the most productive ways possible instead of being at odds with each other.

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The importance of bringing assessment and teaching together is especially critical in the early school years. Good teaching from the beginning means successful children, and successful children complete school. Because literacy is so important to achievement in virtually every school subject, getting children off to the right start in reading and writing is perhaps the single most important goal for early education in our schools. As the national spotlight on early childhood education has intensified in recent years, the issue of young children's reading and writing development has been studied like no other time in history. Significant strides have been made in developing curricula for prekindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade that get children on the road to continued success. But the full potential of these programs will be realized only if testing is designed to support good teaching.

The issue of assessing young children's literacy learning has been an important part of the recent work on early literacy. In a special issue of the *Elementary School Journal* devoted to early childhood education and at a national conference on early childhood literacy assessment, I reported that current standardized tests of reading and writing designed to be used in the early years have two major problems. First, their method of assessment does not fit young children's developmental needs and social characteristics. The standardized test is a highly formal measurement situation very different from the teacher-student interaction in the regular classroom and is not designed to hold young children's interest. The second problem is that current standardized tests do not measure all the aspects of young children's reading and writing development that need to be measured. P. David Pearson, co-director of the U.S. Department of Education funded Center for Reading Research and Instruction and one of the primer movers in the reading test reform project in Illinois, and I have both found that children's comprehension of written language, their early reading strategies, writing abilities, and the building blocks of their phonics abilities are not tapped by typical standardized tests of reading readiness or beginning reading in ways that are directly applicable to quality reading and writing instruction. These factors all combine to mean that the tests yield less than accurate pictures of what children really do know. In short, the tests do not provide information that can be used to promote high quality teaching.

Early Literacy Assessment in Texas: The First Grade TEAMS Test

Statewide testing of young children's reading and writing in Texas is accomplished through the first grade TEAMS Test. This test is a multiple-choice, standardized instrument that assesses minimal competency in 9 reading and 4 writing skills. Writing is assessed indirectly rather than directly by the test because no writing sample is actually obtained from the children. TEAMS is a classic example of the standardized testing approach to assessment. As such, it is an instrument not designed to be a model for instruction. However, it clearly has come to occupy just such a role, as recent surveys of Texas educators show. These surveys also indicate that the effects of TEAMS on first grade students and teachers are not viewed as positive. A sample of over 1200 administrators and supervisors who are members of the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association was recently asked about the first grade TEAMS test. Although 69% of them agreed or strongly agreed that they were receiving the local support they need to improve TEAMS scores, only 28% of them felt that the emphasis on first grades TEAMS causes teachers to make better instructional decisions. The voice of Texas' first grade classroom teachers is perhaps even stronger. Forty-seven per cent of the over 200 random teachers surveyed said that the reading and writing scores from first grade TEAMS affect their curriculum planning and day-to-day teaching to a great or a considerable extent. Seventy-two per cent agreed that first grade TEAMS had a great or a considerable effect on curriculum and teaching practices in their schools. But 63% said that the effect has been negative or very negative. Furthermore, if first grade teachers in Texas had their choice, 90% of them said they would change the practice of assessing first grade children's reading and writing with TEAMS: 45% would prefer to replace TEAMS with more developmentally appropriate ways of assessing growth in reading and writing, and 45% would prefer to eliminate the test and have no first grade assessment program.

Clearly, the first grade TEAMS test has had a major impact on reading and writing instruction in Texas. Just as clearly, Texas teachers, Texas principals, and Texas supervisors feel that this standardized test has had a negative effect on curriculum and teaching. Research studies and experiences in other states mirror these conclusions.

Recommendations for Early Literacy Assessment in Texas

The elimination of the present first grade assessment program of using TEAMS, a single standardized test, to measure student achievement in reading and writing is recommended. It is important to stress, however, that assessment should be a fundamental aspect of the first grade program in Texas' schools. The early years are the key to first-rate literacy instruction in our schools, and assessment can be an important part of high quality reading and writing programs. But assessment must be compatible with good models of teaching. Michigan and Illinois have taken the lead in making state assessment reflect outstanding teaching practices in the upper grades. Texas can be one of the leaders in insuring that early childhood literacy assessment fits with good instruction.

A decision has been made to shift the administration of TEAMS to October of the school year beginning in 1990. The shift in testing dates means that the first grade test must become more of a readiness instrument. But if the model of teaching and testing present in the current test underlies the new version—even if the new version is some type of checklist rather than a multiple choice instrument—this change will not make the problem with the testing-teaching relationship get any better. In fact, it will only get worse. Instead of having first grade instruction that fragments reading and writing far too much and focuses only on lower order skills, we will have a kindergarten program of that type, forcing inappropriate instruction on five-year-olds.

Therefore, the state should insure that a high quality, developmentally appropriate literacy assessment program be developed and implemented. Such a program would have three fundamental characteristics:

(1) The knowledge and skills being assessed would reflect what classic and current research shows about early child-

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hood literacy learning.

(2) Assessment procedures would be designed to fit as closely as possible with what is known about quality early childhood literacy teaching practices.

(3) The methods for gathering assessment data would include observation and performance samples of children's work under normal classroom conditions as well as test-like situations.

This kind of program for assessing early reading and writing would promote good teaching practices, would help teachers plan more effective ways to work with individual children, and would be useful in providing meaningful information to parents about their child's work.

The current first grade testing program is not achieving its goals and, from teachers' and administrators' perspectives, is producing negative effects like those experienced in other parts of the country. Early childhood and assessment are not incompatible, but we must reform current practice if we are to provide appropriate services for children in our schools. Texas has the potential to be at the forefront of a movement to insure that children get off to the best start possible in reading and writing. A new, developmentally appropriate assessment program is an integral part of any such movement.